



Shaky Economy Halts Talks of Impact Fee Hike

By LINNEA BROWN, Hernando Today

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BROOKSVILLE - Nice study, but the timing is wrong.

That was the message delivered Tuesday afternoon by members of the Hernando County School Board to a roomful of concerned citizens during a workshop in which members opted to ignore a recent recommendation to raise education impact fees.

"It's like throwing a glass of water to a drowning man," Vice chairman Jim Malcolm said. "Now is not the time to raise impact fees."

In December, a school board consultant released a report recommending the school impact fee per new single-family home be raised from \$4,266 to \$10,000 to cover new school construction - an increase of about 134 percent.

The consultant, Washington-based Henderson Young & Co., cites a substantial enrollment growth for county schools, a trend that should continue.

The firm cited data that shows an increase in enrollment during the next five years and the need for new school buildings. The report also recommends increases to new multifamily and mobile homes.

Jim Malcolm, a longtime member of the board, said he supports impact fees and developers paying their fair share - just not in the current economic climate.

"Even we liberals have common sense," he said. "When people aren't building is not the time to say 'Let's raise your tax.'"

New homebuyers in Hernando County currently pay seven impact fees, which are imposed on developers and builders to fund capital improvements in the community.

Board member Pat Fagan, who doubles as Hernando County's parks and recreation director, adamantly opposed the hike, and suggested sitting down with local builders and residents to discuss both sides' needs.

"We, as a county, are hurting right now," he said. "And one of reasons is that we don't work more closely with the local businesses and homebuilders. We need to work together."

Currently, impact fees per single-family home in Hernando County total \$9,027. That includes

all seven impact fees. Should this consultant's recommendation be approved, the total would be \$14,761. That's not including any of the other proposed six impact fees Hernando County commissioners may hike.

Diane Bonfield was the lone board member who cited the merits of a hike.

"Someone has to pay for growth. Our taxpayers are taxed to the max," she said. "In the past, we haven't been collecting what we should, and if you look at our present impact fee, it's not enough."

However, she, too, conceded that the timing was wrong.

Since growth has slowed countywide, the board agreed that the need for additional revenue to support expansion is not crucial.

Fagan suggested a gradual hike in impact fees in future years, determined with input from local business leaders.

"Maybe a few years down the road, we can sit down with builders and increase it in small amounts," he said.

Critics have said it is vital county officials not raise impact fees during this period of market uncertainty, and that it could further push Hernando County out of the housing market.

The board members agreed that if future challenges to the current impact fee rate should arise from builders or developers, the new study validates it.

"This is an air-tight study," Malcolm said. "At least we can use it to defend what we have."

The workshop was followed by a stakeholders' meeting for members of the Hernando County Chamber of Commerce, Hernando County Builders' Association and county planning staff.

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